

Testimony on Raised Bill No. 6432

Submitted by Wendy Lecker
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Chairperson Stillman, Chairperson Fleischmann and Members of the Education Committee

I am co-president of Stamford's Parent Teacher Council, the umbrella organization of Stamford's 20 PTO's. I am also the parent of three public school children in Stamford. As you know, Stamford is a diverse district that has made some impressive strides in addressing the achievement gap in the past five years. We have much work still to do, and we are focused on providing a quality education to all our 15,000 students.

I applaud Raised Bill No. 6432's intention to create a resource center which would appear to facilitate the exchange of information. Such a center has the potential to build a school district's capacity to improve instruction and the provision of other educational services. I also applaud the apparent recognition, in the creation of an Interagency Council, that there are many factors outside the school walls that affect a child's achievement. Decades of research has shown that poverty plays a powerful role in academic achievement.¹ Therefore, at the same time we work to improve our schools, we must address the social and economic ills that our children and communities suffer. There are, however, certain provisions in this bill that I question.

Which Achievement Gap?

The term "achievement gap" is not defined in this legislation. Does it merely mean the gap in test scores (proficiency? goal?) If the bill targets test scores, I respectfully submit that increasing the focus on test scores can have deleterious effects on our children. The non-partisan Center on Education Policy has found that a high stakes testing under NCLB has narrowed curricula nationwide. CEP reports that seventy-one percent of districts have reduced time spent on subjects other than reading and math since the No Child Left Behind Act has been in effect². A narrowed curriculum narrows not only the subjects our children can study, but also their exposure to different types of learning. This unintended consequence of the focus on tests works to diminish our children's opportunities to advance in education and in the workplace. While tests may be easy for us to use as a measure, they fall far short of providing us with a meaningful picture of a student's learning. If we acknowledge that there must be many measures of successful learning, why limit our focus to test scores, especially when test scores are widely acknowledged to be imprecise measures of student success.³

¹ Berliner, David, Our Impoverished View of Educational Reform.
<http://www.terecord.org/content.asp?contentid=12106>

² Jennings, Stark-Rentner, Ten Big Effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on Public Schools <http://ceep-dc.org/index.cfm?DocumentSubSubTopicID=31>

³ AERA Position Statement on High-Stakes Testing in Pre-K – 12 Education

How was the date 2020 chosen?

If the bill defines achievement solely in terms of test scores, what is the basis of choosing 2020 as the date that test score gap will be eliminated? Were psychometricians consulted as to whether or not this date is realistic? Renowned testing experts like Professor Robert Linn of the University of Colorado and Professor Emeritus W. James Popham of the University of California have written extensively about the rate at which one can expect test scores to rise.⁴ As we know, the federal No Child Left Behind Act mandated that all students reach proficiency by 2014. Schools and school districts, especially those most in need of assistance, suffer increasing levels of sanctions as the 2014 date approaches. The 100% proficiency goal has been roundly criticized by testing experts as being unrealistic and therefore subjecting schools, teachers and students to stigma and punishment based on an unreasonable goal. Would it not be prudent to avoid this pitfall and consult testing experts prior to establishing a date at which the "achievement gap" (however defined) will be eliminated?

Accountability Reports

Subsection (c)(4) requires districts with an achievement gap to prepare "accountability reports" on how they are addressing the achievement gap. Every reporting requirement means additional funds that must be expended by the district administrative purposes. Where will this money come from? In this period of economic distress, we can't expect that municipalities are going to give extra money to districts to meet this obligation (I have never seen a municipality provide extra funds to a school district for any state mandate). Thus, the money to fulfill this requirement will come from cutting teachers, social workers, or some other service or resource that **has been proven to raise achievement**. Moreover, don't these districts already address this issue in their Strategic District Improvement Plans? Is this extra reporting mandate necessary when the state most likely has all this information already? Imposing more administrative requirements on districts that are impoverished diminishes their capacity to serve our children. I believe our focus as a state should be to build our districts' and schools' capacity to provide necessary educational services to all our children.

<http://www.acra.net/?id=378> ; National Association of School Psychologists, *Large Scale Assessments and High Stakes Decisions: Facts, Cautions and Guidelines*
http://www.nasponline.org/resources/factsheets/highstakes_fs.aspx ; Amrein, A.L. & Berliner, D.C. (2002, March 28). *High-stakes testing, uncertainty, and student learning* *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 10(18).; <http://faculty.mdc.edu/jmenair/arical/Articles/High-Stakes%20Testing.htm> ; Eva L. Baker, Paul E. Barton, Linda Darling-Hammond, Edward Haertel, Helen F. Ladd, Robert L. Linn, Diane Ravitch, Richard Rothstein, Richard J. Shavelson, and Lorrie A. Shepard; *Problems with the use of student test scores to evaluate teachers*, http://epi.3cdn.net/b9667271ee6e154195_t9m6ijj8k.pdf

⁴ See e.g., Linn, Robert *Conflicting Demands of No Child Left Behind and State Systems: Mixed Messages about School Performance* <http://cpaa.asu.edu/epaa/v13n33/v13n33.pdf> ; Popham, W. James, *America's "Failing" Schools*, New York, RoutledgeFalmer 2004.

Has the legislature assessed the cost of this reporting requirement?

In my experience the state mandates actions in the hopes of improving achievement, and often these mandates end up causing an underfunded district to divert necessary educational resources away from the students who need it most. The state does not assess the cost of these mandates prior to imposing them. For example, last year, the legislature mandated that certain districts establish school governance councils. The state never costed out these councils, but the mandates such as data gathering, training and other requirements that were imposed on school districts (mostly cash-strapped districts) cost money.

Before the legislature imposes mandates on districts, it would be helpful if it: (1) showed peer-reviewed evidence that these mandates actually improve achievement and (2) assessed the cost of these mandates.

Research Base?

Nowhere in this bill do I see any requirement that the master plan be based on peer-reviewed research. There are so many claims out there for what will eliminate the achievement gap- many are questionable, politically motivated, and unsupported by real evidence. To rely on anything but solid evidence would do a disservice to our neediest students across this state. In addition, I believe it is crucial, in developing its master plan, that outstanding teachers and school administrators play a major role. There are so many experienced and knowledgeable educators across our state who dedicate every day to improving student achievement. They can provide a wealth of information regarding what really works with our students.

Respectfully submitted,

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